

ON A QUASI COIN REPORTED FOUND IN A BORING IN ILLINOIS.

Read before the American Philosophical Society, Dec. 1, 1871,

BY WM. E. DUBOIS.

In July last, a letter was received at the Smithsonian Institute, from Mr. Jacob W. Moffit, of Chillicothe, Peoria county, Illinois, enclosing the photograph of a medal or coin, with the following particulars in relation to it :

“In August 1870, I took a contract of sinking a tubular well for Mr. Peter Cline, in this county. I had two men employed to assist in the labor, who are cognizant of all the facts connected with the finding of the coin.

“The following are the several strata through which we passed. We used a common ground auger, three inch bore :

“Soil, 3 feet. Yellow clay, 10 ; blue clay, 44 ; clay, sand, and gravel 4 ; purple clay, 19 ; brown “hard pan,” 10 ; green clay, $8\frac{1}{2}$; vegetable mould, 2 ; yellow clay, $2\frac{1}{2}$; yellow hard pan, 2 ; mixed clay, $20\frac{1}{2}$.

“Here we brought up *the coin*, on the auger, from a depth of one hundred and twenty-five feet.

“It has been examined by gentlemen in Chicago and St. Louis, without any result in explaining the mystery of its origin or date. It is my desire that a further investigation be made. I can, if necessary, send affidavits of myself and other parties as to the truth of these statements.”

[Signed]

JACOB W. MOFFIT.

It may here be added, that the place is in a great prairie, near the centre of the State, and near the Illinois river ; about 80 miles east of the Mississippi river.

Professor Henry having repeatedly referred rare coins to me, took the same course on this occasion, giving leave to communicate the facts to this society, if it was thought proper.

An examination of the piece itself was necessary ; and in reply to my request the owner forwarded the same, with further details, to wit :

“In answer to your questions I must say, that very few wells or shafts in this region have attained a depth of more than 50 or 75 feet, except in the valleys, where occasionally we find a well, through sand and gravel drift, at the depth of 100 feet.

“The only token of civilization discovered at a similar depth, in this State, was taken from a shaft in Whiteside county, about 20 years ago. The workmen at the depth of 120 feet discovered a large copper ring or ferrule, similar to those used on ship spars at the present time. They also found something fashioned like a boat-hook.

“There are numerous instances of relics found at lesser depths. A spear-shaped hatchet, made of iron, was found imbedded in clay at 40 feet ; and stone pipes and pottery have been unearthed at depth varying from 10 to 50 feet in many localities.

“No rational estimate has ever been made of the rate of annual earthy deposit. Our prairie land seems to have been built up by a deposit from

waters whose current set in from the N. W., changing its course only when in contact with some (then) eminence now far below the surface. The soil is seldom over three feet in thickness, usually underlaid by a yellow hard-pan of two to three feet. Wood is quite common at all depths at which wells have been sunk in blue clay.

“Nothing has been found in any of the Western mounds (as far as I am informed) bearing any resemblance in form or character to this coin.

“On taking the coin from the auger, I washed the clay from it with water. It then presented no appearance of corrosion, bearing a dull red hue, such as is common to old copper. However, after a few minutes, exposure to the air, it began to blacken, and in a short time was encrusted with a dark green, gummy coat, which I allowed to harden, and then removed by friction.”

Thus far from Mr. Moffit. I learn from another source, that Chillicothe is built upon an alluvium of the Illinois river, very sandy, loose, and easily washed away. The river thereabouts is widened into a lake, about one mile and a quarter wide, and twelve miles long. The French pioneers went through that region, about the close of the seventeenth century. Whether the ground on which Chillicothe stands, has been made by the river, to the depth of 125 feet, since the entrance of the whites, is a point on which the residents there, with or without geological instruction, cannot venture an opinion.

As to the facts as above stated, there is every reason to rely upon their accuracy. I have to add some remarks on the physical and artistical traits of the coin itself.

Properly speaking, it is not a *coin* or medal, since the marks upon it have not been produced by striking, but by engraving or etching; and they are sunken, or intaglio. It is of copper in good condition, in shape polygonal approaching to circular, about one and an eighth inch in diameter; somewhat pitted by corrosions, and with very rude figures and inscriptions on both sides. The central image on one side is that of a man, or a child; on the other are two animals, one of them like a wild cat, with conspicuous ears. The legends are plain enough, to any one who can read them; but being somewhere between Arabic and Phonographic, without being either, they are sufficiently puzzling. Happily we have members whose knowledge of paleography may throw some light. For myself, I have seen nothing like it.

As to the other artistic characters, the metal proves, by a delicate gauge, to be very uniform in thickness; more so than could be attained by the beating out of a hammer in savage hands. I therefore feel sure it has passed through a rolling-mill; and if the ancient Indians had such a contrivance, it must have been pre-historic.

There are other tokens of the machine shop. Any one can see that the piece has been shaped, not with much symmetry, with shears or chisel; and the sharp edge taken down with a file. Coins or medals were not thus finished in ancient times, but they were in the middle ages, and in

Spanish America down to about 150 years past. (Tapping the edge with a hammer, was also in use).

If the figures and characters were made with a tool, it must have been a very rude one, since a "flat-nosed" graver would have left a smooth trough, while here it is rough and granular. This would suggest the greater likelihood of *etching*, were it not inconceivable that so advanced an art should have been practiced long ago on the Western prairies. The mineral acids, used for such work, were nowhere known until about the fourteenth century; and in Illinois, while we might suppose *agua ardiente*, we cannot concede *agua fortis*, longer ago than one century. On the whole, it has been worked out with a very crude instrument.

As to the condition of the piece, and the discolorations; it is well known that copper, exposed to the air, acquires a superficial sub-oxide or dioxide, which protects it from further destruction. Very many ancient copper coins have been turned up by the spade or plough, which with a little cleaning up, look as if just out of the mint. I herewith show a specimen of Tetricus, a Roman usurper of the purple, in France, about A. D. 270; entirely free from corrosion. I also show a more interesting piece, which with many others, was ploughed up in the southern part of England, about 30 years ago. They were all so encrusted as to be illegible, and the owner gave me a choice at haphazard. On removing the coat of mail, and leaving only the mixture of brown and black oxides, it turned out to be a coin of Carausius, who established himself as a Roman Emperor in Britain, A. D., 287; as long before William the Conqueror, as William was before Victoria. This piece is rare and in perfect order, and forms a part of the Mint collection.

Some ancient coins, especially those with a slight alloy of tin or calamine, making them bronze or brass, are beautifully coated and protected with the green carbonate, the same as that which formed on the Illinois piece before cleaning. I herewith show one of these patinated pieces, a coin of Augustus, also from the Mint Cabinet. They may have been in favorable hiding-places, such as cinerary urns, or columbaria.

All things considered, I cannot regard this Illinois piece as *ancient*, nor *old*, (observing the usual distinction); nor yet *recent*; because the "tooth of time" is plainly visible.

What the piece was made for, is a part of the inquiry. Not for current money, because it would take a long time to make a handful; more likely a work of amusement, possibly to exercise the antiquarians. But how it got into such a deep place, supposing it a *bona fide* discovery which I cannot call in question, is a very perplexing point, and I gladly hand over the explanation to any one willing to undertake it. Certainly it seems, in connection with the finding of the copper ring, and other articles of iron and wood, at considerable depths, to form an item in the study of the formation of the superficial strata in that interesting section of our country.

Since the foregoing was written, I am favored with the suggestions (in writing) of Professor Lesley. He suspects that if anything, it is an astrological amulet. There are upon it the signs of Pisces and Leo. The

figures, on the obverse and reverse faces correspond in the attitude of the left arm raised and flourishing a whip, or thunderbolt. He reads the date 1572, and says that no geologist can accept the statement that a piece of that age could be lying naturally at a depth of 125 feet, under an Illinois prairie. The piece was placed there as a practical joke, though not by the present owner; and is a modern fabrication; perhaps of the sixteenth century; possibly of Hispano-American, or French-American origin. It may have some connection with the journeys of the early French priests or their voyageurs.

I would only add, that those views are forcible, but yet they take imposture for granted, and in so doing, leave us in this dilemma; that a curious piece was made many years ago, and held for the purpose of trick, until a deep hole should be made, long afterwards, in which to bury it, and complete the deception. It is also very hard to believe, that an intelligent and experienced operator in this line would allow himself to be sported with by workmen, and take so much pains, far and near, to ascertain what kind of article he had found.

Mr. Lesley explained:

He considered the integrity, experience and vigilance of the well sinker no guarantee against the surreptitious insertion of the coin. It is impossible to prevent a practical joke of that sort when the jester is resolved to have it so. Experience furnishes a thousand proofs of this in our extensive oil regions, where all kinds of rubbish have been brought to the surface from considerable depths; nails, anthracite coal, California nuggets, "butter of antimony," Lake Superior Red hematite iron ore, &c.

It looks as if there is a good deal of this sort of thing going on in the west. The copper-ring and boat-hook "taken from a shaft at Whitside; at a depth of 120 feet," "the *iron* spear-shaped hatchet embedded in clay at 40 feet" mentioned in the paper, are subjects for the same incredulity. The only possible explanation, excluding an imputation of fraud, in the latter case, would presuppose the recent filling up of a hole in the river bed with clay, through which a piece of iron might slowly settle down.

The discovery of a circular stone fire-place, with embers, by Mr. Latrobe's party of engineers in a gravel cut for the road bed of the Baltimore and Ohio R. R., many years ago, at a depth of 50 or 60 feet beneath the surface, is a circumstance belonging to quite a different category.

In the present case we have an evident imitation of Mediterranean coins. But the central figures are unmistakably Red Indian in their character. It is either unique of its kind, or one of a very small class. The probabilities against a borehole striking such an object are simply infinity to one. The improbabilities of the coin being at or near the surface, and being worked out from the wall of the hole by the friction of the rods, is equally great. There is too much method in the arrangement of the elements of the legend to doubt that the maker had a definite idea to express. A compound oval symbol occupies the right edge on each face, and may have a phallic significance. But the two human figures on one

face seem rather to be in conflict than in conjunction. The head dress may represent hair, or may represent the Indian warrior's feather crest.

Professor Trego remarked that he had seen the once famous grave mound relic and the man "who discovered" and possessed it, and believed it to be fraudulent. He had no faith in such discoveries in the west.



Stated Meeting, December 15, 1871.

Present, twelve members.

DR. WOOD, President, in the chair.

Letters of acknowledgment were received from the Anthropological Institute of G. B. and Ireland, Nov. 24, 1871, (83, 84, 85, 86, and Trans., Part 1, 1870). The N. V. d. P. R. u. W. at Bonn, Feb. 5, 1871 (82, 83). The N. Ges. Emden., Sept. 21, 1871 (84, 85); and the Linnean Society at Bordeaux, July 12, 1870 (78, 79).

Letters of envoy were received from the Societies at Bordeaux and Emden, Sept. 22, 1871; the Geographical Society at Vienna, Sept. 3, 1871; the American Legation at the Hague, Nov. 28, 1871; and the U. S. Naval Observatory, Dec. 5, 1871.

The death of Count Agenor Etienne de Gasparin, in June last, was announced by the Secretary.

Professor Cope communicated his views on the Method of Creation of Organic Forms, with illustrations on the black-board.

Professor Cope added a Catalogue of Pythonomorpha found in the Cretaceous strata of Kansas.

Pending nominations 679 to 683, and new nominations 684 to 688 were read.